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ABSTRACT

As more state and federal initiatives develop around the care and education of preschool children, the challenge is to link the public education agenda to the larger early care and education field. This paper discusses the essential elements of a public/private preschool partnership and considers questions related to providing quality preschool education to preschoolers while being sensitive to the effect that such partnerships have on the availability and affordability of child care for younger children and to other issues. The National Child Care Association recommends that any analysis of a community's preschool must be guided by the following six principles: (1) parental choice as paramount in program planning, development, and implementation; (2) careful and deliberate community planning; (3) continued collaboration and partnerships with the private early care and education community while building programs on existing agency structure, funding streams, and quality measures; (4) program structures involving integration of at-risk children with their peers and including a full range of education, early care, and school-age care; (5) public/private partnerships equitably and adequately funded at the full cost of providing the service; and (6) development of programs that are accountable to policymakers, government agencies, families, and the early care and education community. The report asserts that the six principles are essential to developing programs that meet parent and community needs and calls for policymakers to ensure that these principles are part of national, state, and local planning so that children receive care and early education that enhances their success as productive adults. (KB)

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BUILDING UNIVERSAL PRESCHOOL IN PARTNERSHIP WITH THE PRIVATE EARLY EDUCATION AND CARE SYSTEM

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Essential Elements for Partnerships Between Public and Private Early Care and Education Systems

A Policy Paper for Programs, Policymakers and Advocates
Prepared by the
National Child Care Association
August 2001

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THE NATIONAL CHILD CARE ASSOCIATION

The National Child Care Association is a professional trade association representing licensed, private care and education programs. NCCA strives to represent the more than 100,000 licensed child care centers in America and to provide leadership to the field on issues of concern and interest.

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INTRODUCTION

The Children's Defense Fund reports that 42 states have invested close to $1.7 billion in preschool initiatives during the 1998-1999 school year. Only one of those states (Georgia) truly offers universal 4-year-old pre-k. Based on a good economy, surplus tax revenue and enlightenment on the value of preschool education, many states are now striving to establish and expand "at risk" programs to the "universe" of preschoolers.

Thirty-one states enroll both three and four-year-olds in programs while 18 focus only on four-year-olds. Eight states serve children from birth through age five, albeit not universally. Nine states only allow school-based pre-k programs, while the majority permits programs in a variety of settings.[1]

What is occurring in state programs does not reflect the public discussion of the topic which seems to include preschool for all children between the ages of three and five. There is no doubt that legislation and public policy are expanding beyond our traditional definition of pre-k as the year before kindergarten. In reality, the term is being used to describe various kinds of state and federal efforts to fund *preschool* programs. Many of these efforts have criteria that limit services categorically by age and/or social-economic status. By definition, the term "universal" means "all -- in its entirety." Therefore, for the purposes of this paper, *universal preschool* is appropriate early education available to any preschooler (ages three to five) who wants it.

Our Nation's considerable interest in universal preschool is well intentioned and with careful planning and visionary prowess should ultimately prove beneficial to all involved. There are over 100,000 licensed child care centers in the United States[2] in addition to hundreds of thousands of family child care homes. The early care and education field is very sincere in its commitment to the societal value of preschool as we literally "live" this value through the services provided to young children every day. We do however question efforts which do not fully utilize the existing infrastructure and which are non-inclusive of this historically private sector service. We are also concerned about the possibility that public sector providers will ultimately diminish private sector capacity for quality care and education for younger children.

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[1] Seeds of Success, State Pre-Kindergarten Initiatives, 1998-1999
[2] The 1999 Child Care Center Licensing Study, The Children's Foundation

As more and more state and federal initiatives develop around the care and education of our Nation's preschool population, the challenge is to link the public education agenda to the larger early care and education field. Questions are being raised as to best practice in designing and implementing such initiatives. The National Child Care Association, through its member state associations, has been called upon to participate in the development of many pre-k/preschool initiatives in various parts of the country. NCCA has studied existing and proposed programs and offers a unique analysis from the perspective of the historical educators of preschool children in America - the private sector.

This paper discusses the essential elements of a public/private preschool partnership. Preschool in the public sector ONLY is not a good solution. Preschool funding, albeit for universal pre-k programs or more narrowly defined "at risk" preschool programs, is snowballing. The result has been the creation of community preschool programs that have both excluded and partnered with the private sector. However, while well-conceived and effective partnership models are good in the short term, we are beginning to question whether the partnerships might prove harmful in the long term. Such harm could manifest itself ultimately by limiting the supply of child care for ages zero to three. Because of the delicate economic balance of a child care center's fiscal operations and the well known fact that fees for older children "subsidize" care for infants and toddlers, broadening the public sector's involvement in the four-year-old market by including school based providers could have an effect on a center's ability to continue this "subsidy." Therefore, short of raising infant and toddler fees dramatically to compensate for the lost internal "subsidy", centers would struggle to continue to provide care for younger children at an affordable cost. Because of NCCA's strong concern about this matter, we are pursuing a study of the impact of universal pre-k on the supply of quality care for children ages zero to three.

The questions for advocates and providers to ponder are the following:

* How does America move forward to provide quality preschool education experiences which are appropriate, fiscally sound, accessible, affordable and fully utilizes existing community-based resources, while being sensitive to the effect that public preschool efforts and public/private partnerships have on the availability and affordability of child care for children ages 0 to 3?
* How does the early childhood community engage the public education system in our dialogue knowing full well that there is a lack of sensitivity to displacing the private sector?
* How do we solve the competition issues currently existing between the public and private early education systems?
* How does the early childhood community get their message to Federal and State Legislators - the ones who are "in the driver's seat" with the development and

expansion of preschool programs?

* How does the early childhood community incentivize supply building in underserved areas and support existing programs with augmented and accessible support services such as effective monitoring and evaluation, adequate compensation and benefits, and teacher training and education?

TOUGH QUESTIONS AND GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR PUBLIC PRIVATE PRESCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS

In our analysis, we found that there are tough policy questions which must be answered before program planning and development begins. The answers to these questions need to be guided with input from all the stakeholders and will determine the scope of the program.

EARLY EDUCATION FOR ALL PRESCHOOLERS OR JUST FOUR-YEAR-OLDS?

Preschool education is politically and socially the "hot button" right now. The trend, when carried out with haste and without thorough community planning with all stakeholders involved, could ultimately be counterproductive to the needs of children, families and community development in America.

Most of the preschool funding in our Nation is targeted to four-year-old, at risk children. The goal of these programs has been to get children "ready" for kindergarten. However, brain research has shown that the real value of quality early education appears in the younger years of zero to three. Thus, we have an unidentified paradox: practice is not conforming to research. This is a serious issue which each state and the federal government must grapple with and examine in the light of demonstrated data. It is important that state and federal initiatives determine where limited investments can be most beneficial and while the "golden crayon" for four-year-olds is useful, it spans only one year of a child's life. Therefore, NCCA supports the concept that public policy should include all at risk children from the ages of zero to four in order to better prepare children for school. Attainment of this goal, however, necessitates a strong financial commitment of more than one year, proper use of existing infrastructure and demands a significantly larger investment of funds.

DETERMINE GOALS FOR PRE-K -- ENTITLEMENT FOR ALL CHILDREN OR SCHOOL READINESS FOR AT RISK CHILDREN?

Free preschool for all children funded by state and federal money creates a new entitlement. Our first question is whether this is something we, as a state/nation, want to do? The second question is whether this is something as a state/nation we are willing to fund to the level of quality and child outcomes we all want? If the goal of this initiative is universal preschool, it is important to plan for the sustainability of the effort through continuing, comparable and sufficient funding. It is equally important to ensure private sector participation to maintain choice and affordability.

On the other hand, categorical, targeted initiatives which are focused on the social good of providing quality preschool environments for at risk preschool children is more

palatable to the taxpayer, to policymakers and makes more sense to the private early care and education community.

NCCA recommends that any analysis of a community's preschool must be guided by the following six principles.

1. **PARENT CHOICE**

   Parental choice is the highest value and paramount in program planning, development and implementation.

   Preschool initiatives should be designed with these components in mind:

   a. Ensure parent choice by providing assistance with the cost of quality early education in a variety of community-based program settings (including quality programs in the private sector).

   b. America's federal policy, i.e., Child Care Development Fund (CCDF), is steeped in the premise of parent choice. It has provided affordable access to early care and education for hundreds of thousands of children throughout the country. CCDF offers parents partial financial assistance to compensate for the cost of quality child care, but acknowledges each parent's right to make choices for their children based on culture, education and specific goals/needs.

   c. If we are serious about encouraging parents to become more involved and responsible for their children, the CCDF is a model for responsible universal preschool growth.

   d. Enhance quality and maximize the number of child care choices for parents by reimbursing child care centers that care for funded children at a legitimate market rate representing the full cost of quality early education and care.

2. **COMMUNITY PLANNING PARTNERSHIPS AND COLLABORATION**

   Careful and deliberate community planning is essential to success and, if many of the issues in this paper are used for guidance, could actually solve many of the problems which have and could develop.

   Successful preschool initiatives are a result of community needs AND the community working together. The only way to identify and address those needs is with a community inventory including needs assessments and evaluations of community resources. Partnership must include ALL the stakeholders at the table and those stakeholders need to be prepared to do a great deal of work and to appreciate the opinions of others, to explore options and to invest time in developing relationships. Unsuccessful (or lack of) planning initiatives can drive a wedge between public and private programs with one side or the other feeling disenfranchised - putting the partnership together is critical.

3. **SYSTEM STRUCTURE**

Continue collaboration and partnerships with the private early care and education community to ensure the maximization of existing infrastructures, expertise and "instant" capacity.

Prudent and fiscally responsible government maximizes available assets and tax dollars and minimizes duplication. Using private sector infrastructure, existing capacity is utilized and the costs of developing start up programs is minimal, contrary to the start up of school-based programs which oftentimes involve construction of new facilities using scarce taxpayer dollars. Utilization of the 17 to 25% average vacancy rate in the private sector is a win-win for all concerned and provides a rapid start up for preschool initiatives without further investment of public funds.

Build programs on existing agency structure, funding streams and quality measures.

Universal preschool is still a relatively new concept and small when compared to America's early care and education system. Just as we shouldn't duplicate resources, we shouldn't develop systems which are redundant. We must take advantage of what is best from our current early education systems. NCCA supports the notions of oversight, quality and accountability of universal preschool programs, but does not believe that it is necessary to "reinvent" the wheel to provide these services. For example, the early care and education community has systems in place through national accreditation programs and state licensing which ensure program accountability, quality and the health and safety of children. Another example is the Child Care Development Fund (CCDF) which is an existing funding vehicle for state and Federal dollars committed to preschool education and child care. Utilize these systems . . . do not create additional administrative bureaucracies and agencies.

There is a great deal of discussion about proper governing auspices for universal preschool. Currently, the spectrum includes state Departments of Education, state Departments of Health and Human Services, and a "coordinating" agency exclusively for pre-k and/or children's issues. Although the premise in the paragraph above would support adding new program bureaucracy on existing bureaucracy, that is not necessarily true in this case. States must carefully examine their infrastructure to determine if this new service "fits" within the existing agencies. The roles that State Departments of Education and Health and Human Services play in early care and education services differ by state with some departments being better equipped in terms of expertise and experience. That is why some states are gravitating towards new departments which

consolidate the funding, education and possibly licensing of pre-k programs. In some cases, this role has been expanded to include management of subsidized funds for children.

4. PROGRAM STRUCTURE

"At risk" children are best served by integration with their peers.

We are very aware of the advantages of integrating children from a variety of social and economic settings. At such a young age, the opportunity to develop a deeper understanding and appreciation of "differences" is boundless and society should plan programs which maximize this opportunity. The private early care and education field has seen this practice work particularly well since the inception of the Child Care Development Fund advancing parental choice. Preschools that once served only children whose parents could afford the fees are now the "second homes" for children from a variety of advantaged and disadvantaged families. The National Education Goals Panel reports that the gap in participation rates in early education between high-income and low-income children has been cut to 13 points. In 1998, that gap was 28 points. [3] *Such progress needs to be continued and enhanced through responsible preschool models.*

The settings where services are offered must be equal in order to let the market operate. Because competition is a healthy American principal which oftentimes ensures greater service and quality, consideration and strategies must be developed to establish a level playing field in the case of public and private child care services.

Quality child care and appropriate early education make children ready for school. These services need to be linked in order to meet the needs of working families. Programs should be designed to provide "seamless" services including a full range of education, early care and school age care.

Our current early care and education system already links these services supporting the needs of working families and community economic development. The system responds to the needs of working parents and therefore offers vast experience providing the services parents and society need and demand.

Preschool classrooms must have qualified early childhood teachers who are trained in early education and have the aptitude to nurture young children.

Although there is general consensus that preschool classrooms need well-qualified teachers, there is not as much consensus on what those qualifications might be. The National Skills Standards Board is currently asking these

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[3] National Education Goals Panel - 1999

questions.[4] *Teacher education is not the ultimate evaluation of good preschool teachers. Rather, is it the teacher's aptitude for the challenges of meeting all the needs of very young children. Preschool systems should not simply use a K-6 licensed teacher in preschool classrooms.*

The needs of working parents must be incorporated into preschool systems and we should make systems "seamless" for working families.

As our society continues its emphasis on welfare reform and productivity, preschool programs must reflect the needs of today's work schedules. Massachusetts and Connecticut are the only two states that require full day, year round preschool / child care for some families. Others are lacking in this important concept. Children in working families are best supported by continuity of education and care.

The needs of young children must be reflected in preschool environments.

It is important that we offer preschool in environments which are appropriate for young children. Not only is the pedagogy for teaching young children different from that of older children, the physical environment must "fit" the age of the child. Are we relegating young children to the large structures and furnishings of school-based classrooms? Are we transporting four-year-olds on buses with older children, or for inappropriate, long periods of time? Are we subjecting young children to the "rules and regulations" and inappropriate regimentation of schools designed for older children? Do we provide appropriate learning and play opportunities? Are we working with parents to provide continuity between preschool and home environments, physical and emotional growth?

Children in all pre-k settings must be given equal protection through the regulation and enforcement of minimum health and safety licensing standards.

A number of States currently exempt school operated and faith based programs from licensing. This places children at unnecessary risk of poor quality programs operated by staff who may not have criminal background checks and may not be required to report allegations of child abuse. School programs may operate under the auspices of the Department of Education which oftentimes has no policy and/or procedures for evaluating the health and safety environments for children younger than five.

Outcome evaluation measures are imperative.

With the investment our Nation is making in preschool, it is critical to demonstrate to parents, taxpayers and policymakers that preschool produces positive outcomes. Appropriate evaluation measures for young children must be developed and utilized.

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[4] National Skills Standards Board, Education and Training Voluntary Partnership

5. **FUNDING**

Public-Private Partnerships must be equitably and adequately funded at the full cost of providing the service.

Inadequate funding of preschool initiatives will only exacerbate the quality and affordability issues with which we are currently struggling. It is critical to planning efforts that adequate funding be provided. In many cases, where resources are limited, we have not made the tough decision that low income children deserve high quality programs. Too often public officials pit the number of children served against paying for higher quality care. The time has come to give all children high quality care and for public policy to plan for the future of society and not mortgage it with short sighted fiscal policies that do a disservice to lower income families and children. To think that there can be high quality programs without compensating dollars is an oxymoron.

We need to acknowledge that the early care and education of our children demands unique and costly services driven by staff/child ratios, teacher compensation, health and safety requirements, square footage and appropriate facilities and equipment. In Georgia, for example, the four-year-old pre-k program is funded at approximately $3,200 (average) per child per year. The program is only six and one half hours per day and operates for nine months. If that amount is carried to a full day, year round equivalent, the cost rises to $8,486 per child! Even that figure is low for many areas of the country. It is also essential that funding for the public and private partners be comparable especially as it relates to teacher salaries and benefits.

We have always agreed that qualified teachers must be compensated for experience and education. In a recent survey by the Child Care Workforce [5], it was found that despite the frequent assumption that pre-k teachers have gained parity with public school salaries, considerably lower teacher wages prevail in this sector. "It remains to be seen how successful the fast-growing array of pre-k programs will be in recruiting and retaining the skilled and stable teaching staff they need."[6]

Multiple, blended funding streams, coordinated eligibility requirements and open eligibility to all segment of the child care and early learning delivery system for grants and funding is an essential component of maximizing the use of resources and infrastructure.

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[5] Then & Now: Changes in Child Care Staffing, Child Care Workforce, 1994-2000

[6] RIGHTS, RAISES, RESPECT - News and Issues for the Child Care Workforce Center for the Child Care Workforce, January 2000

Parents must be considered partners in programming and in the payment of fees creating the ability to leverage fees with subsidies to extend the funding for subsidized children.

Most, if not all, of the existing models do not include parent co pays. When thinking about the fairness of this, it is important to remember that many preschoolers in areas when publicly funded preschool has started were already in early education settings prior to the introduction of publicly funded preschool. These parents had already made a commitment to their children by paying for this important service. We believe that we need to consider parent co pay for several reasons, not the least of which are leveraging parent contributions to fund more services. Parent should pay according to their abilities and families able to pay a greater share should pay close to full cost.

6. **ACCOUNTABILITY**

Our Nation's vast investment in preschool demands accountability by policymakers, government agencies, families and the early care and education community. School readiness is the mantra of publicly funded preschool. The preschool experience supplies children with the tools needed for readiness, including appropriate, culturally sensitive learning opportunities, nutrition, family support and health care. Developing ways to measure these outcomes is critical to children and the continuing growth of preschool programs.

CONCLUSION

There is a need for children's programs that are of sufficient quality, affordability and available so that parents may choose what best meets their needs. To have such a system, it is imperative that partnerships be developed with the early care and education community. Without legitimate partnerships there is a risk of compromising the existing early care and education infrastructure. Significant cost increases would result and the efficient use of existing capacity would not likely happen.

NCCA believes that the six principles outlined in this policy paper (i.e. parent choice, community planning partnerships and collaboration, system structure, program structure, funding and accountability) are essential to developing programs that meet parent and community needs. NCCA calls for public policy makers to dialogue and ensure that these principles are part of national, state and local planning so that our young children receive care and early education that enhances their success as productive adults.